

1 **Minutes 8/31/2015**

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2 **Jericho Fire Services Task Force Meeting**  
3 **August, 31 2015 7:00 PM**  
4 **Jericho Town Hall, 67 Vermont Route 15**  
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6 **Members Present:** Chris Corbin, Frank Fisler, Chuck Lacy, Matt Thomson, William Bresee  
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8 **Others Present:** Tom Joslin, Peter Booth, Lisa Rector, Olaf Verdonck  
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10 The meeting was called to order by Matt Thomson at 7:00 PM  
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12 **1. Public Comment**

13 Tom Joslin identified the Bellows Free Academy as a nearby example of a private entity which  
14 underwent a transition to a public entity. The Academy was funded out of an endowment, but  
15 ran afoul of issues based on the guiding principles for how the board was to be formed.  
16 Similarly, the Central Vermont Public Safety Authority (CVPSA) may be a relevant model to  
17 explore. Overall, the concern is that the governance structure may not be appropriate for a  
18 private entity funded out of the public purse.  
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20 **2. Minutes.**

21 The minutes of 8/17 require amendment under Section 5 to reflect a clarification regarding  
22 Officer roles from UJFD Chief Mat Champlin.  
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24 **3. Meeting Goals**

25 The task force is currently focused on data collection, and becoming better informed. This  
26 meeting was an opportunity to learn from the principal proponents of the motion to form the  
27 task force. The task force seeks clarity on what questions are of interest to the proponents of  
28 the motion.  
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30 **4. Panel Input**

31 Concerns raised by the panel covered a number of areas. Any figures quoted herein have not  
32 been independently verified:  
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- 34 • Concern about an ostensibly private entity consuming almost exclusively public funds
- 35 • Is the governance structure appropriate?
- 36 • Does the UJFD hold itself to the standards common to other NGO's – Open Meetings,  
37 Board of Trustees, etc.
- 38 • Dissatisfaction that one full year after the question was raised, UJFD could not address  
39 the question of why their budget was so much higher than Hinesburg.
- 40 • Is the UJFD more or less expensive than neighboring departments?
- 41 • Does the Selectboard have the appropriate information and/or skillset to vet the UJFD  
42 budget?
- 43 • A large portion of the budget going to debt service, but the public does not appear to  
44 have input into what debt to take on. The fire station on Route 15 is an example of this.
- 45 • What happens to funds when budgeted items are paid for by Grants?
- 46 • We appear to pay the budgeted amount rather than actuals with a significant reserve  
47 building up – is there a reconciliation of spending to budget?

- As a private entity does the UJFD lack access to certain benefit programs and packages available to public entities? Do we pay more for the benefits received as a very small business?
- Do the full time staff have good benefits?
- As a private entity does the UJFD miss out on grants?
- The towns have changed over the last 100 years, is the private entity structure still appropriate?
- Is it appropriate that the capital assets purchased by the UJFD (property, vehicles, etc.) using taxpayer dollars do not belong to the towns?
- There is a perception that Hinesburg accomplishes the same (operating safely) for less money.
- Is UJFD's procurement process sufficiently transparent given the apparent conflict of interest? (Treasurer is / was proprietor of Clarks, which services the particular brand of vehicles predominant in the fleet.
- Are there sufficient controls on UJFD's capital acquisitions? What are the parameters of the bid process?
- Of the UJFD's \$195K personnel budget, roughly \$77K goes to volunteers, and nearly half of that is for meetings / training.
- The gravel pit on UJFD land has been in violation of Act 250 since 2006 (permitted 5 acre pit, 17 acres open), leaving 12 acres to be restored – who will cover the costs to come back into compliance.
- An estimated \$200K (not inflation-adjusted) of Jericho taxpayer money has been spent on the Rivers land since 1987.
- UJFD's full-time staff spend some time managing the Rivers Property, including the Gravel Pit and Act 250 hearings. Is this funded out of taxpayer dollars?
- Can the agreement between the towns and the UJFD be modified to stipulate transparency and suitable governance for a taxpayer-funded organization?

## 5. Discussion

In the course of raising these concerns, several salient points were discussed:

- There is a perception that the Selectboard have neither the technical acumen nor the time to properly vet the UJFD budget. When the budget was presented to the town, it appeared the SB neither backed nor condemned the budget.
- It is not uncommon for private institutions to subsist on public funds. The Howard Center is an example of such an institution.
- There may be a gap between the skillset intrinsic to running an emergency response organization and engaging the Selectboard and public.
- As a counter-example to the relative freedom UJFD has to spend on capital, the library district had to put a boiler upgrade up to town vote and it was voted down.
- While UJFD is well equipped, their department is not necessarily "Gold Plated". Engines custom built by third parties onto traditional truck chassis (such as International) can be significantly less expensive than the purpose-built engines (Pierce, Rosenbauer, etc.).
- There may be advantages to using the brand of truck that can be serviced within a mile of both fire stations.
- UJFD has good firefighter retention – they like their culture

- Compared to years gone by, very few firefighters work in Jericho or Underhill, so there are far fewer volunteers available to respond during the day. This is in part the rationale behind having full-time staff. (2 members, working 8 AM to 4 PM Monday to Friday).
- Franklin, VT may prove to be a relevant comparison to UJFD (also private volunteer organization)
- Kling report may identify other private departments for comparison.

#### **6. Next Meeting**

The next Task Force meeting will be held 9/28 at 7:00pm.